



**The Associate Educational Fellowship Programme**  
*'Improving professional practice through collaborative enquiry and dialogue'*

## **Writing as a Form of Dialogue**

### **Prologue**

In truth, you have to be quite brave to translate your thoughts into writing and then share them with others - especially if the readers are strangers to you.

Spoken dialogue with family, friends and colleagues feels much safer. You have some idea about their prior knowledge and what interests them. You know their "hot buttons" and what to avoid. Above all, in a conversation you can monitor the body language of your listeners sentence-by-sentence to check for subconscious nods of understanding and the furrowed brows of confusion. You can then move on apace or retrace and reword your points accordingly. None of this is available in writing for others. Dialogue and conversation are always preferable for immediate mutual understanding.

But face-to-face exchanges have a significant limitation. Unless you are very focussed and self-disciplined it is difficult to develop a complex line of thought through dialogue. Any attempt to share a detailed string of ideas is best conducted in writing or as a presentation with written backup so that listeners can retrace and reconsider your arguments with some confidence and precision.

I have been a writer of a particular kind for many years: one where the main audience has been me. I write both to remember and to clarify my thoughts. My memory is such that if I did not regularly record ideas they would be gone in a matter of days. And my stream of consciousness is often so jumbled and digressive that if I did not write ideas down and reorder them, I would rarely generate any coherent thoughts at all!

So, I write to help remember and reorganise my thoughts, and over the years these recorded ideas run to many thousands of words in journals and computer files. But the idea that I might share this writing with others fills me with dread. The ideas are often rough and unfinished. They record trains of thought that become messy and meandering journeys, and when I look back, I rarely agree entirely with what I have written and sometimes not at all. I constantly move on. If I had shared some of the ideas with others at the time I wrote them, they would no doubt have haunted me.

Someone reading notes I had written in 2007 - in the heady days before the financial crash and at the peak of a generous Labour government - would be amazed at my optimism and naivete. From the vantage point of a less positive and more dispiriting age, they are ideas I'm glad I kept to myself.

But if writing is offered and accepted in a spirit of dialogue and humility, as a contribution to a debate and not a principled stand in a war of words, this fear disappears. If it were the sharing of 'work in progress' to be picked over, added to or rejected, then I would be happy for anything I have ever written to stand the test of time - if only for the sake of amusement.

While it still requires some courage to contribute to a positive, problem solving dialogue, as long as your ideas are posed tentatively and not offered as 'the last word' on a matter or overly invested with ego, arguably the risk is not so great.

It is in this spirit that I want to contribute to the debate on curriculum that has been stimulated by Andrea Spielman's speech to the Festival of Education in June 2017. The key extract is below and the key word she uses that sums up how I currently feel about government's education policy is 'wretched'.

I have written four consecutive pieces which I will post on the a Forum in the coming weeks as a contribution to this debate. They are all currently under the broad title:

**'Creating a Balanced Humanistic Curriculum':**

1. Grappling with complexity
2. What exactly 'is' a 'balanced curriculum'?
3. How has it become so 'unbalanced'?
4. Creating a balanced humanistic curriculum from the bottom up.

I am posting them separately because although they are already written, I will be only too pleased to revise each subsequent one in light of comment and criticism.

Whether you read them or not, or contribute to the debate or not, putting them together has helped me to revisit the curriculum issue and both clarify and record my own thinking so far. I hope these ideas grow and develop as a result of your feedback.

I hope that this is an issue that has grabs your attention and that my contribution helps fellow travellers. But it will only become a dialogue if you respond!

Extract from Andrea Spielman's speech

*"One of the areas that I think we sometimes lose sight of is the real substance of education. Not the exam grades or the progress scores, important though they are, but instead the real meat of what is taught in our schools and colleges: the Curriculum.*

*To understand the substance of education we have to understand the objectives. Yes, education does have to prepare young people to succeed in life and make their contribution in the labour market. But to reduce education down to this kind of functionalist level is rather wretched.*

*Because education should be about broadening minds, enriching communities and advancing civilisation. Ultimately, it is about leaving the world a better place than we found it."*

Mike Berrill